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ABSTRACT

South Carolina's successful comprehensive school plan to develop and maintain public support for its school reform package, the Education Improvement Act, is offered in this paper, which focuses on the necessity of public support for successful reform. Key components of the plan are described, which include timing and public interest, state leadership, building and retaining local/school ownership, a comprehensive reform package, broad vision, promotion, an annual focus, financial investment, and maintaining long-term interest. A conclusion is that South Carolina's successful outcomes resulted from viewing educational reform as a long-term commitment. (21 references) (LMI)

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Education Issues

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IMPLICATIONS FOR WISCONSIN'S REFORM EFFORTS

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July, 1991

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About the Author

Terry K. Peterson is Executive Director of the South Carolina Business-Education Committee, a panel of state leaders in business, the legislature and education which oversees South Carolina's comprehensive education reforms; he is also Assistant to the President of Winthrop College. Dr. Peterson has been involved with task forces on educational reform with many national and regional groups. In 1988, he chaired the Task force on Accountability and School Improvement for the U.S. Department of Education. He is on a Resource Group advising the National Goals Panel, the Chapter I Independent Assessment Panel, and the National Business-Education Task Force. He chairs the southern regional panel setting goals for Arts Education. He is frequently asked to advise state leaders on education reform strategies. Dr. Peterson grew up in Medford, Wisconsin and has a Bachelor's Degree from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He has lived in South Carolina for the past twenty-one years.

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School Reform in South Carolina

Terry K. Peterson

If only a few educators, parents, and members of the public have owner-ship and understanding of the broad goals and intentions of Wisconsin's education reform proposals, their effectiveness could be substantially reduced. Leaders of Wisconsin's education reform need to recognize that without broad ownership, support for the reform initiatives will be doggedly eroded over time. A recently reelected governor of one party and a state superintendent of another party working together on the proposals of the Commission on Schools for the 21st Century gives Wisconsin a positive start in gathering bipartisan support, but much more will need to be done.

South Carolina is often singled out for the comprehensive way its leaders developed and maintained interest in their reform package, the Education Improvement Act (EIA), and for the attainment of many of the reform goals they set in 1983 for 1989 and 1990 (Glennan, Chance, National Alliance of Business, Timar). For example, the following phenomena have been observed in South Carolina:

1. Higher ratings of their state's reform effort by teachers (more A's and B's) since 1983 than teachers in any other state. (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 1988, 1990.)

2. Fifty-two percent of the South Carolina citizens had heard about their reform effort compared with 25 percent of the citizens in six southeastern states, all of which had enacted highly visible reform packages (Howell 1988).

3. By a 4 to 1 margin, business leaders in South Carolina in 1989 felt the state's Education Improvement Act "had a positive impact on business." (Division of Public Accountability 1989)

The educational problems in Wisconsin may be different from those in South Carolina (the current level of performance is different), but to reach Wisconsin's new goals, almost every student, classroom, school, and school district must improve. Although some students and schools may need to improve more than others, it is the collective advancements of almost all that will place Wisconsin in the forefront of the international academic achievement race. This advancement will be most apt to occur if most students, teachers, and administrators are positively motivated by the reforms.

If large numbers of parents and citizens do not support the proposed changes, the reforms may operate in a vacuum, and their results could be minimal. Similarly, it is important that the media be supportive of the reforms (in their final form, at least), and that they understand that it will take time to implement the initiatives and to see results. Furthermore, the effort must be bipartisan or nonpartisan. It can't become fodder for political rhetoric. Business, too, must join in if Wisconsin is going to make the desired progress in education. Here is where the experience in South Carolina might be helpful.

Although a statewide referendum on the EIA was never seriously considered in South Carolina, reform package promoters (then-Governor Riley, and a small core of business, education and legislative leaders) felt they needed to proceed as if general public and educator referenda were going to be held. Some of the key components of their successful approach were as follows:

Timing and public interest in the support for the reforms. Modern education reform is not a new concept to South Carolina. It has been an ongo-ing, dynamic process—starting with a series of legislative actions in 1977. In that year, the legislature enacted the South Carolina Education Finance Act (EFA), along with a school finance equalization plan. In 1984, they passed the EIA and in 1989 they enacted Target 2000, another reform package. Various implementation plans are currently in effect. The development in 1983 of the EIA was timely in light of the education reform movement that swept the nation in 1982-83. With this national recognition of the erosion of American economic strength and the relationship of student performance to the job market and economic growth of cities, states and the nation made it possible for South Carolina to forge ahead with major education policy initiatives.

If the nation as a whole was "at risk" (educationally and thus, economically) in 1982-83, then South Carolina was perhaps more at risk. In the 1970s, South Carolina ranked poorly on numerous educational scales. In 1979, for instance, almost 40 percent of the state's entering first graders were "not ready" to begin a typical level of learning and were at risk of failure in school. The future for these children was bleak unless major educational improvements took place. While South Carolina was noted for its dependable work force, state leaders recognized that employers could not fully tap this potential unless substantial educational improvements were made in the "mind power" of the future work force. An extensive public opinion poll conducted in the summer of 1983 indicated that the general public also sensed the need to move boldly to improve the state's schools.

A comprehensive, creative, and innovative plan of action to address the problems was needed. Using poll data and other information describing the quality of education, two blue-ribbon committees of state leaders built a consensus and developed a set of goals. The EIA eventually resulted and became both the plan of action and a means to

a permanent source of funding with which to tackle the educational problems.

Developing and retaining ownership of the reform package among significant state leaders. The process by which the EIA was developed allowed for the direct participation and personal involvement of many of the state's leaders—people in education, business, the legislature, the South Carolina Department of Education, and the governor's office. Two blue-ribbon committees of more than 30 persons each studied the educational needs in the state and then developed goals and strategies to meet the perceived needs. One committee chaired by the governor was composed mainly of business leaders, but included representation from among the top legislative and educational leaders. The second committee became the working committee that generated the initial ideas; it was composed of roughly one-third educators, one-third citizen and business representatives, and one-third government representatives. The chair was a business leader.

It would appear that a coalition of business leaders, educators, and legislators can put together and sell a package of reforms, but having the governor at the forefront of such an endeavor gives the effort added visibility and cohesion, and facilitates building public support. In 1983, having been reelected by a wide margin, then-Governor Richard W. Riley was well suited for that leadership role. Also, active and visible leadership of the state superintendent and his staff was very important.

Building and retaining local community and school ownership of the reforms. To gain broad citizen, parent, and education support for the reforms on a statewide basis, local representatives must carry the message to and from state-level decision makers. Bill Chance (1986) calls it a "T-Formation" and suggests that South Carolina was the best example of a T-formation in seven high-reform states. The horizontal line in the "T" represents a coalition of top state leaders and the vertical line represents two-way communication between the statewide leaders and their local members or constituencies (i.e., the governor's and state superintendent's grass roots supporters).

One component of the T-formation was the initiation of regional forums, broadly publicized and held in seven sites throughout the state, in the evening, to solicit local citizen and educator opinions on the package of reforms being considered by the two blue-ribbon committees. In some locations, 100 small group discussions transpired simultaneously at the forum site, each with trained discussion leaders. A total of 13,000 people participated in the forums (Peterson 1988). Earlier the same day, 10 to 15 state leaders, including the governor and other promenent state leaders, visited schools, spoke to PTAs and civic clubs, and appeared on television and radio talk shows about the need for substantial educational reform and the need for everyone to work together to accomplish goals. Approximately 40,000 people were directly involved in some "forum day" activity (Peterson 1988).

A second approach to secure initial local involvement, advice, and interest was the provision of a toll-free hotline for citizens to call in their ideas and suggestions for the reform package. A third activity was a series of "coalition- building" meetings hosted by the governor at the governor's mansion. These meetings involved specially designated county reform coordinators (one educator and one lay leader) and boards of directors of all the education related groups.

The state-local connection (or T-formation) was institutionalized by then-Superintendent Williams when he formed regional implementation councils composed of local educators, and staffed by top administrators in the Department of Education. This interaction encouraged the resolution of state-local differences on implementation issues before they became big problems.

Making the reform package comprehensive. The sixty-one strategies contained in the EIA were designed to give a coherent and comprehensive approach to major school reform as well as to build upon the reforms of the late 1970s. They were designed to have a positive effect on students, teachers, administrators, schools, districts, and the state as a whole while calling for more parent, business, and citizen involvement in the schools.

Significantly improved results require the following: significant, simultaneous advances in curriculum, teaching strategies for high content, assessment of students, participatory leadership, continuing education of teachers, technical assistance, flexibility in policies to meet students' needs, parent support (in school and at home), community interest, and business involvement.

Maintaining a broad vision of school reform. Tuning in to national and regional thinking on educational reform focused attention on new educational issues and policies. It is easy to be drawn into specific, narrow concerns when involving large numbers of people in decision making.

Several actions helped focus attention on broad issues and long-term goals. Early on and throughout the development process, a number of key legislators and educators accompanied the governor to national and regional meetings where many education reform issues were discussed. On a number of occasions, out-of-state experts and public figures, such as governors who had led education fights in other states, were brought to South Carolina to speak. This dialogue with national experts continues today at a variety of committee meetings and statewide seminars and conferences.

Promoting and selling the package. Television ads, newspaper ads, and bumper stickers—all privately paid for—encouraged the public to get behind the new reform agenda. A proactive speaker's bureau, with trained speakers and handouts, provided some 500 speeches to various organizations and groups. Speakers explained the

need for the educational changes and answered questions about the proposals. To keep the momentum going, a second media campaign in the third year of implementation of the reforms was initiated.

Focusing on improvement every year at every level of education. The combination of initiatives in South Carolina's reforms causes an annual focus on progress or improvement at the school, district, and state levels. This activity includes preparation of annual school, district, and state report cards and involves citizens, educators, and business representatives working on legislatively mandated oversight committees at the state level and in school councils at the local level.

At the state level, the two annual report cards of performance are the *Annual Report on the South Carolina Education Improvement Act* and *What is the Penny buying for South Carolina?* These documents are used by the oversight committees, the General Assembly, the State Department of Education, the governor, and the State Board of Education to identify progress, problem areas, and possibilities for new reform initiatives.

At the school level, a number of activities also occur which focus on improvement. Once a year, a School Improvement Council, with the principal, must prepare a School Improvement Plan. In addition to the School Improvement Plan, an annual report card of overall student performance in each school gives local school officials and leaders an opportunity to compare their performance for one year against previous years, against similar schools, and against the state as a whole. A School Incentive Award Program also gives annual financial rewards to schools making the largest gains in student achievement and attendance relative to their peer groups.

"Putting your money where your mouth is." It would appear that new investments in education are a critical feature of starting and sustaining school reform. Because funds for the South Carolina initiatives are assured in the special reform fund, complex reforms—such as school incentives awards, new leadership training, computer assistance in schools, early childhood programs for four-year-olds, and the exit exam for graduation with the provision of extra help to students likely to fail it—could be phased in an orderly manner over a six-year period.

In a recent interview for a Kentucky newspaper, former South Carolina Governor Richard Riley stated very bluntly the importance of investing in education if you are serious about reform: "Some were for the standards, but not the resources.... Any fool could be for that." (Geiger)

Maintaining excitement and interest in educational reform over the long term. The reform legislation requires that the blue-ribbon committees that developed the EIA be retained to monitor the implementation and results of the reforms. A smaller number from each of

the two large committees comprise an accountability subcommittee—the Business-Education Subcommittee. The combined existence of these oversight bodies has caused a significant number of state leaders in business, education, and government to stay engaged in the vision of a cooperative statewide school reform plan for more than eight years. This phenomenon is an important factor in sustaining academic reform.

To keep the flame of reform burning during implementation, several special actions were taken after the EIA was enacted. The year after it passed, representatives from the governor's office, the Department of Education, and local school districts organized a visitation program wherein business leaders visited every school in the state. The local media covered the visits and highlighted positive events in the schools.

In the fall of the third year of implementation, the governor's office, Department of Education, education associations, and local school districts sponsored another set of forums around the state to report to local citizens and educators on the early results of the EIA. Local press coverage also assured continued interest. The media continues to publicize the school, district, and state report cards on educational progress; school incentive winners; and recipients of innovative grants, thus keeping the notions of progress and reform in the news.

Conclusion

South Carolina's reform efforts have resulted in a number of advances in school and student performance between 1985–90:

- Improved student writing performance,
- Higher student and teacher attendance,
- More students entering college and passing college freshman courses,
- Higher achievement in the basic skills,
- Many more students taking Advanced Placement Courses.

Both the process by which the reforms were developed and the content of the reforms contributed to the success. But much remains to be done.

A prominent South Carolina business leader, CEO Walter Elisha of Spring Industries, explains the importance of maintaining the long-term view of educational reform: "As exhausting and frustrating and expensive as we often feel major change to be, it is not a short-range effort. It must be continual and forever, for reform is a journey and not a destination." (Elisha, p. 11)

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